

BACKGROUND ESSAY

“Great Terror.” Stalin wanted to purge [eliminate] anyone who might challenge him, even former colleagues and advisors. Informants reported; evidence was manufactured; and show trials were held. Confessions were obtained through the use of torture and intimidation. All classes of society were subject to Stalin’s excesses. Like thousands of others, a theater director reported, “I incriminated myself in the hope that by telling them lies I could end the ordeal.”

By late 1938, opposition to Stalin had been eliminated or silenced. Stalin now turned his attention to international events.

In August 1939, he and Adolph Hitler agreed that their countries would never invade each other. With this guarantee, Hitler invaded Poland one week later, precipitating the start of WWII. In June 1941, Hitler betrayed Stalin and sent his armies into the Soviet Union.

Because Stalin had ordered the execution of many military leaders during the Great Terror,

the Soviet Union struggled to mount an effective defense and lost an estimated 20-30 million men during the war. Stalin was forced to look to the United States and to Great Britain to help him defeat the Nazis.

Stalin believed, “Whoever occupies the territory also imposes on it his own social system as far as his military can reach.” By the late 1940s, Stalin forcibly extended Soviet communism throughout Eastern and Central Europe. He did not honor his promise to the Allies to allow free elections throughout Eastern Europe. Instead, Stalin and his men installed puppet governments controlled by the Soviet Union. The communists seized property. They controlled the media. They suppressed religion.

Stalin’s actions presented a real threat to Western Europe and the United States. By the time of Stalin’s death in 1953, the Cold War was raging. It would last for another 36 years.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. How many people died as a result of Stalin's policies?
2. How did collectivization lead to genocide in Ukraine?
3. Describe life in the Gulag.
4. What was the Great Terror?
5. In your opinion, why did the Ukrainian people oppose collectivization?
6. What basic human rights were violated as Stalin purged his enemies?
7. How did Stalin extend communism throughout Europe?